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Introduction

Following graduation, from the University of Iowa with a Ph.D. in elementary education, I clearly remember my aunt asking me very kindly but cautiously if when I completed my graduate work, could I get a "better job." Of course I knew what she meant and I also understood where the question originated. Who ever heard of a *man* with a terminal degree teaching second-graders? Wasn't that illegal or something? Wasn't that "women's work?" Wouldn't I at least teach high school? Wouldn't I take an administrative position or find a job teaching "bigger students." The answer was a definitive NO. I was not going to work with *larger* students despite the fact I had recently earned a *larger* degree. I was heading back to the classroom to teach second- and third-graders.

As I moved into the job with my shiny new title, "Dr. Lynn E. Nielsen," I was eager to extend the writing I had completed for my dissertation research. As I began to look closely at aspects of my experience as an elementary teacher in a pre/K-12 setting, I soon discovered a series of institutionalized partitions which separated me as a primary teacher from my K-12 colleagues. What I discovered was unsettling. At least five areas categorically rendered me second class by virtue of my association with elementary education, an occupation socially and organizationally designated "female."

My teaching load was roughly double that of my counterparts in the secondary school. I was assigned to a grade level *unit*, not a *department* as my colleagues were. Curriculum organization was led by chairpersons at the high school level. No elementary faculty was in charge of a curricular area for the school. The elementary discretionary budget was managed by the elementary principal or by the department chairpersons. Elementary teachers managed small amounts of money deposited into homeroom accounts funded by parent fees. If elementary teachers requested substantial purchases, those had to be approved by department chairpersons or the principal. My office was equipped with cupboards where the offices of administrators and my colleagues at the upper levels were equipped with book shelves. While that fact may have been trivial, the implication speaks silently and profoundly of a long-standing tradition of "difference."

None of these disparities of access if explored individually were particularly notable. However, when examined collectively, the composite picture they represented formed a matrix of injustice which reflected a prejudice toward children and those who nurture them. Further this picture roughly follows the profile of the disempowered woman prior to women suffrage. She was dependent on males for the management of resources, she cared for small children, she was expected to put in disproportionately long hours serving the needs of others and most importantly, she didn't vote. She remained voiceless. As a male, this was the first time in my professional life I had been made to feel invisible, "barefoot and pregnant." Clearly the closer my work fell to the world of children, the lower was the status assigned to such work (Griffin, 1997). Working at the desk of a second-grader, couldn't have placed me closer.

To better understand and interpret my experience I set upon two courses of action. First, I explored the literature on gender construction and masculinities examining its relationship to the world of work and the construction of a professional identity in the context of elementary education. Second, I began to talk to the men in the UNI teacher education program who were choosing elementary education as a major.

Masculinities and elementary education as a female social construct

Any discussion of the meaning of gender is by its very nature complex. It is further complicated by recent social changes which have offered women widely expanding social access. Despite these advances in equity, what has not changed is a subtext of patriarchy which places greater value on "men's work" even when performed by women and lesser value on "women's work" even when performed by men. Examining the gender configuration of institutions such as the state, the workplace and the school, Connell (1995) discovered two dimensions—*power* and *production relations*.

Regarding power, he establishes the obvious link between masculine dominance and subordination of women but also points to a complexity in this matrix of patriarchy. Multiple social roles compete for dominance when local reversals place women in power positions and thereby become complicit in patriarchal systems which work to replicate the traditional power structure. "Men's interest in patriarchy is further sustained by women's investment in patriarchy, as expressed in loyalty to patriarchal religions, in narratives of romance, in enforcing difference/dominance in the lives of children…" (Connell, 1995, p. 242).

In terms of production relations, Connell (1995) identifies the gendered nature of work and the assignment of roles. As the experiences of individuals accumulate under the pressure of social roles, their collective experience shapes institutions toward masculine dominance. In the school setting, even when feminist ideology disrupts traditional discourses of masculine hegemony by allowing women access to positions of institutional power, these assignments do not necessarily disrupt the narratives of masculine dominance and may in fact replicate them due to the fact that "men's work," even when performed by women carries more social currency than "women's work." Margaret Mead (1949) observed that, "Men may cook or weave, or dress dolls or hunt humming birds, but if such activities are appropriate occupations of men, then the whole society, men and women alike, votes them as important. When the same occupations are performed by women, they are regarded as less important (Mead, 1949, p. 159).

This pattern can be seen clearly in elementary education and at the primary grades in particular. When I brought inequities of teaching load to the attention of my administrators, a male assistant principal simply shrugged off my complaint with the quip, "You chose your major." Case closed. With that choice I became an institutional female stripped of access to the professional resources that my counterparts (some female) in other parts of the school enjoyed as "men."

Male elementary teachers interviewed by Allan (1993), described a disadvantageous situation created by the stress stemming from conflicting gender expectations. If they conformed too strictly to hegemonic views of masculinity they were perceived as incompetent teachers. If, on the other hand, they were not masculine enough by being too nurturing and empathic, their sexual orientation became suspect.

These findings parallel those of Sargent (2001) in his study of 35 primary teachers in Los Angeles. He concluded that the men who do enter elementary education will be held accountable for behaving in gender appropriate ways despite the feminine discourses which drive their professional environment. To negotiate these tensions, he found these men to emphasize those

aspects of the profession that paralleled gender-role expectations and to diminish or even devalue those that posed a threat to their gender identity. The gendered expectations of elementary teaching made constructing a professional identity difficult for veteran male elementary teachers who were expected to act male in a female domain.

In the face of these gender associated divisions, increasing numbers of women are accepting positions in school administration, a traditional male domain. But men on the other hand are not populating the ranks of classroom teachers with equal proportion, especially at the lower elementary level. This fact only creates a greater gender imbalance in the profession. Statistics for 2005 indicate that nationally, less than 25 percent of teachers are male and of that number only nine percent of elementary teachers are male. However, simply adjusting the proportion of men and women in the field will not make the field more gender equitable. The gender segregation in teaching takes on multiple layers (Scott and McCollum, 1993). When men choose to enter elementary teaching, they peel back only one of these layers. Peeling the next layers would involve increasing the number of men who wish to teach lower elementary and preschool, along with increasing the number of men who want to remain in the classrooms throughout their careers.

Times have changed and with it the surface structure of the school has changed as well. For example, in my former school, teaching loads and budgetary control issues have become more equitable. However, what has not changed is the perception that elementary teaching is the domain of women and that the men who choose to become elementary teachers, an occupation stereotyped as a "woman's job," violate the norms of masculinity that prescribe them to stay away from feminine pursuits (Montecinos and Nielsen, 1997). I and other men like me joined the ranks of elementary teachers despite the social obstacles which made choosing to teach young children difficult to negotiate and sustain. That fact may partially account for the confusion that arose when I first encountered the jolting division of a profession which perceived me to be organizationally "female." The roots of this perception reach far into the past.

Historical Perspectives on the Gendering of Elementary Teaching

Following the Civil War, the teaching profession welcomed women among the ranks of classroom teachers (Altenbaugh, 1992, Morain, 1980). For example, many women in the 19th century took a course while in high school which allowed them to receive a teaching license upon graduation from high school (Schwieder, 1996). Without a wide array of employment options available, single women who chose teaching as a career, were able to exercise significant moral authority and influence in their communities. By the first part of the 20th century women began to dominate the ranks of the teaching profession, a pattern that persists to this day and may partially account for eroding levels of respect the teaching profession witnessed during the 20th century. Regarding disrespect, Tyson (1994) suggests, "Teachers have never been high in the social pecking order of the United States, but the noble, literature-loving spinster of earlier eras was at least respected. In modern times, 'dissing' teachers has become a national pastime…" (p. 122).

In the 19th century a teacher was held up to a much more stringent moral standard than counterparts in other professions. In fact, Altenbaugh (1992) has suggested that teaching was a first cousin to the clergy. Through the classroom, female teachers gained access to the levers of moral authority in their communities. But clearly the teaching profession was shaped by contradictory thinking that roughly paralleled the sexist attitudes of the 19th century. On the one hand, women were elevated to high levels of moral authority while on the other hand denied the right to vote.

Glenda Riley (1984) describes this phenomenon extensively in her book *Women and Indians on the Frontier, 1825-1915*. Women were socially constructed as paragons of moral virtue while simultaneously considered inferior to men, weak and unable to function without the supervision of a male care-taker. A similar pattern was constructed to place Native American Indians in a subordinate social role. Two images prevailed. The first cast Native Americans as noble savages, larger than life, superhuman, and heroic in stature. This image can be seen in objects such as the cover of the Big Red tablets which were common in one-room schools throughout the country. The second image denigrated Native Americans, devalued their cultures, and rendered them subhuman and unworthy of social status or equity. In both cases, these images preserved the hegemony of white males and did nothing to disrupt the balance of social power and structure.

Both women and Native Americans were kept at arm's length where social engagement could be conveniently avoided and thereby managed in order to preserve the status quo and existing distribution of power. For the white males who held the levers of power in the 19th century, women and Indians were socially constructed and manipulated through the imposition of the extreme. Specifically, women and Indians were pushed to the conceptual margins of society through social reduction and social elevation. On the one hand they were exalted, set on a pedestal of granite, chiseled into stony silence, muzzled by the power of idealism. On the other hand they were reduced, rendered powerless and made impotent by virtue of their divergence from the narrow margins the prevailing masculine narrative imposed upon 19th century in order to shape and control social norms. By definition therefore, women and Indians were excluded from access to social power and economic or political legitimacy. Subordination was their social legacy.

While the sun has set on the 19th century, suffrage has been won, and fiscal parity is increasingly visible in the economic lives of American women, the fingerprints of the past can still be found in the construction of education. Old beliefs and behaviors die hard. Griffin (1997) has argued that historically teaching was a socially designated female occupation which paralleled the patriarchal structure found in the larger society. In her conceptualization, the teaching profession when coupled with social conceptions of femininity lacks voice, autonomy, control, status, and salary when compared to occupations linked to conceptions of masculinity. Further she notes that the teaching profession blurs the boundaries between home and school, creating isolation and emphasizing "helping" which associates women with the nurture of small children (Ben-Peretz, 1996; Biklen, 1995).

Implications for the Teacher Education Program

Having looked at the literature related to the gendering of the teaching profession, I began to talk to the men enrolled in the elementary education program. Specifically, I explored how they constructed their identity in the context of a profession socially designated "female." With my colleague Carmen Montecinos, we conducted semi-structured interviews with forty men enrolled in the elementary education program. Based upon the voices of the men we talked to in these interviews, we drew three conclusions which have implications for the teacher education program.

First, the teacher education program should emphasize "an ethic of caring" as a regulatory ideal of the teaching profession rather than a gender-associated teacher attribute. We found that the men we interviewed for this study drew heavily on a discourse of caring when defining themselves as teachers (Montecinos and Nielsen, 1997). The voices of these men suggest that

an ethic of caring crosses gender lines and is a regulatory ideal of the teaching profession. One of the men we talked to put it this way:

> It's not even teaching as in giving kids more and more knowledge. It's more of being there for them, being someone that they can rely on each day and know that there's one person in their life who's going to give them some structure and guidance in their life.

Another man we talked to described his motivation for teaching by connecting it to his enjoyment of working with kids. He put it this way:

> I wanted a job where I could have an effect on the lives of children. I thought this was probably the best job you could have to have an influence on kids' lives, so that was my first reason. I also enjoy working with kids.

This is consistent with the conclusions drawn by Segal (2001) when she affirms that, "Men strongly desire to be caregivers just as much as women…" (Segal, 2001, p. 107). Reflections on my own experience suggest that I went into elementary education because I cared about children and the lives they would have in the classroom.

Second, the teacher education program should place the personal narratives of men in the profession in a prominent position in discussions of gender, because the experience of those men may be very different from that of men in the undergraduate teacher education program. The program could assist these male undergraduates in reflecting on how scripts of masculinity bound their performances as teachers. In that regard, one man we talked to related how one of his classroom supervisors attributed to him a different set of expectations based upon his gender. He reported:

> I had a field experience with a female teacher. She said "I'm not expecting you to be as creative as a girl in this situation. Most times males aren't as creative." Granted, we may not be as creative, but I know a lot of female teachers that aren't creative. To me, does a fancy looking bulletin board actually make a teacher a better teacher? To me it's more important how you can present that math lesson. Can you get 20 students to learn that lesson?

Clearly, this man was confused by the gender scripts which placed him in a category as "uncreative" based upon his gender while at the same time he recognized that creativity was not a normative gender characteristic for women. As this situation illustrates, an awareness of gender discourse can better prepare men for the contradictions and conflicts they may face as they manage their masculinity in an occupation built upon the assumption that workers will draw from discourses of femininity. Only after the normative elements of gender are questioned will men and women examine and select from a full spectrum of possible professional identities.

Third, the teacher education program should problematize gender throughout the program sequence. The undergraduate male elementary education majors we talked to reported being celebrated for their gender and verbally rewarded for their interest in working with children. They experienced the advantages offered by a public perception that children needed more male role models.

> I've had a lot of adults, male and female, say positive comments that we need more male role models in elementary school. The other thing [they say] is that I'll get a job because I'm a male.

However, this kind of validation would be expressed with some caution as well:

> I threw out the comment to my mom that I might enjoy teaching kindergarten. One of her first remarks was that in Iowa, it's rarely seen. People might have some problems with that. They might wonder what was wrong with me. I think that's probably changed since. I know she's changed her view on it since then, but her view was never that anyhow. She wouldn't have seen any problem with it because she knows me. She was just pointing out the way the rest of society looks at it. Society has changed even in this amount of time.

While these men were celebrated for their willingness to stand out and join the ranks of elementary teachers for the sake of the children, they also knew this role would come with a certain attached suspicion. For example, they knew that they would have to be more restrained and restricted with regard to the emotional expression they could exhibit compared to their female co-workers. But these restrictions were not problematized in the teacher education program. Instead they remained invisible under the power of the males' presumed proclivity for "distance":

> .... females can get away with hugging students, where males have to stay at a distance. Females can show more emotion and society doesn't look down on them because you don't hear of many females abusing children. You hear one or two stories of males abusing students, so it's almost a "hands-off" kind of teaching . . . [this is not a problem]. I've never really been a huggy type person anyhow. I wasn't raised that way. I was more 'hand shake and high five' which will work great in a classroom. In the teaching aspect, I don't think gender makes a difference at all. Males can teach just as well as females. A male could teach English as well as a female.

These experiences suggest the importance of analyzing the classroom environment through a prism of gender. Like them, when I made the decision to become a teacher, my decision was celebrated and applauded. Nothing in my education program or in the classrooms in which I participated as an undergraduate student, helped me understand the potential gender conflicts I would encounter in a field where I was expected to act female. Only later did I discover that in the context of the elementary classroom, gender had a very different meaning, one which was closely aligned with feminine social constructs.

Conclusion

Recruiting men into a profession not intended for them requires that the teacher education help them to reflect upon how scripts of masculinity shape their teaching performance. An awareness of discourse of gender can better prepare them for the stresses they might face as they must carefully manage their masculinity in an occupation that is built upon the assumption that workers will draw from discourses of femininity. Both the literature on teacher education and the experience of the men we talked to suggest that teaching children offers enough flexibility that the men were able to accommodate their own stereotypic images of gender while at the same time questioning the contradictions and conflicts these images present.

That men and women jointly share many contributions to the well being of children is self-evident. It is also supported in the literature and echoed in the statements of the men we talked to. However, the teacher education program must explicitly address the elementary teaching profession through a prism of gender. When gender is made to be a central construct around which social life is conceptualized, teacher education students can recognize gender as a set of norms, social conventions, and cultural values which parade as expressions of individual choice. Only after gender is no longer normative and its key elements questioned will men and

women examine and choose from the full range of social roles that can be constructed in the name of teaching.

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